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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0577  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1283  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 0289  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC 0754  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC 0670  
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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: LIFE ON THE STEPPE, FEBRUARY 7 - 13

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11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (U) This is another in a series of weekly cables drawn mostly from public media, as well as think-tank, NGO, and opposition web-sites, selected to show the diversity of life in Kazakhstan, and information about it available to citizens of Kazakhstan. Our goal is to choose what might interest and be of use to various end-users in Washington and -- especially -- to provide a more complex view from the other side of the world, illustrating the vitality (and sometimes the quirkiness) of discourse available to citizens of Kazakhstan.

PICKETERS BRAVE COLD TO PROTEST HOUSING SITUATION

13. (U) On February 6, a handful of people picketed outside the office of Prime Minister Karim Masimov in Astana to demand government action against construction companies that have failed to deliver on commitments to complete purchased housing units. Calling themselves the Movement for Acceptable Housing, the protestors stood outside for hours despite sub-zero temperatures and howling winds, holding signs saying, "If the government can bail out the banks, why not us?" The group eventually received a letter from the Prime Minister's office, informing them that the government could not interfere in what it considered a private commercial matter. A leader of the group, Saule Tasbulat-Kizi, was clearly unimpressed by the government's response: "If the government of Kazakhstan can replace the president of a private bank, or invest taxpayer money in a private bank, then a statement like this one is a cynical lie," she said.

MAYOR'S PATIENCE FINALLY RUNS OUT

14. (U) After listening to citizens' complaints for nearly twenty-four hours, the acting mayor of Shakhan, a small town in Karaganda oblast, called the police, who hauled off seven local women to the police station in a squad car. Acting mayor Karipol Mukatov told reporters that he listened patiently for hours as the women complained about rising electricity prices and poor public service, "but every time I took care of one problem, they would raise something else." (NOTE: Electricity prices in Karaganda recently doubled, from 5.52 tenge -- about 3.7 cents -- per kilowatt hour to 10.03 tenge/kilowatt hour, or 6.8 cents/kwh. END NOTE).

The leader of the group, Svetlana Yerzhimanova, was fined 2500 tenge (approximately \$17), and the other women were let off with a warning. Immediately after the incident, Nurlan Nigmatulin, the governor of Karaganda oblast, fired Mukhatov for allowing the women to spend the night in the mayor's office. Nigmatulin told Mukatov he should have convinced the women to return home and file a complaint in writing, rather than holding an illegal, all-night protest in a government building. Nigmatulin then convened an extraordinary plenary session of the oblast government, during which he convinced the power company "Energomunai" to reduce electricity tariffs to the previous rate of 5.52 tenge per kilowatt hour.

#### EXTREME ANTI-CRISIS MEASURE

15. (U) A man from the village of Baidibek in the region of South Kazakhstan named his son Dagdarys, which means "crisis" in Kazakh. He said that it is now the most popular word, not only in Kazakhstan, but in the entire world. According to an old Kazakh custom, giving children names with a negative meaning will protect them from that very evil.

#### NEW BLACK AND WHITE CROSSWALKS IN ALMATY

16. (U) On March 1, traffic police in Almaty will station three live zebras at pedestrian crosswalks throughout the city to underscore the importance of traffic safety. Police will allow children to cross the street while riding on a zebra, with the expectation that riders and motorists alike will go slow and look both ways. The zebras were a gift from the government of Namibia and will travel the country following their debut in Almaty.

#### WOMAN REJECTS NEW APARTMENT, LIVES IN STAIRWELL

17. (U) Balkiya Turarova from the village of Semey in East Kazakhstan oblast received a subsidized apartment from the state, but it was in such poor condition that she moved instead to the

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stairwell of the building and sent her kids to live with relatives. Turarova has been living in the stairwell for more than a month and said that as many as 50 people planned to join her. She pays approximately \$200 a month for the mortgage on the apartment, the walls and windows of which are apparently covered with mold. The health inspector's office in Semey reported that the apartment meets acceptable living standards and conforms to the city's building code.

#### "SLAVE MARKET" FOR DAY LABORERS

18. (U) Dozens of men from all over Kyzylorda oblast gather each morning in the regional capital to offer their services for hire at so-called "slave markets." Although the men do not hold regular jobs, they are also not officially registered as unemployed. One man said he went to the local employment office and was offered work as a janitor at such a low wage that he refused to take the job. The informal markets for day laborers are unregulated and men are sometimes mistreated. For example, 25-year old Saulet, nicknamed "tomato man," was taken to southern Kazakhstan to work for several months on a tomato plantation, but reportedly was paid nothing after he finished the job.

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